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SUBJECT: AL-BAGHDADIYA TV: IS THE FORMER IRAQI REGIME
BROADCASTING FROM CAIRO?

REF: FBIS REPORT GMP20050731542001 OF 31 JUL

LONDON FOR ARAB MEDIA UNIT

SENSITIVE

¶11. (U) This is a joint message with Embassy Amman and Embassy Cairo.

¶12. (U) Summary. There are reports in Baghdad and Cairo that members of Saddam's family, or at least unreformed Saddam-era Ba'athists, may be using new satellite channel al-Baghdadiya as a Trojan Horse to re-enter Iraqi politics. The station's true backers and purpose still remain murky, but it is relying substantially on expatriate talent groomed under Saddam, who kept the media under the tight rein of his family. While al-Baghdadiya's reporting on Iraq has been factual -- and critical of Saddam -- the channel's Ba'athist, anti-coalition themes bear close monitoring and evaluation. End Summary.

¶13. (U) Beginning September 12, 2005, Iraqi newshounds had a new option to track developments in their homeland, a Sunni-flavored broadcast, beamed from Cairo via NileSat to the Middle East and North Africa. Programming on the new station - "Al-Baghdadiya" - is primarily entertainment (mostly Egyptian), together with news reporting of Iraqi politics and social issues. Al-Baghdadiya's field correspondents (they have several across Iraq) come across as professional and polished. The station's design graphics and presentation are sophisticated, but not on a par with other choices readily available to an Iraqi viewer: al-Iraqiya, Ash-Sharqiya, or al-Hurra. The new station is well below al-Jazeera's standard for both production values and overall program variety.

¶14. (U) At its inauguration, Al-Baghdadiyah proclaimed that it would be a transparent window on Iraq to promote democracy: "the Iraqi citizen has the right to know all. Let's take firm steps toward real democracy." Despite its claim that "Al-Baghdadiya is yours, ask about it," there is scant information available on the station's ownership.

Rumors of Links to Saddam's Family

¶15. (SBU) Embassy PA staffers confirm that Muhsin Al-Ali and Faris Tuma al-Tamimi are the Al-Baghdadiya station managers in Cairo and Baghdad, respectively. Al-Tamimi's office recently advised Embassy Baghdad PA staffers that he would meet with them upon his return from Cairo. Iraqi contacts in both cities report that al-Ali and Al-Tamimi are wealthy Iraqis who moved to Cairo years ago, with Al Tamimi now commuting from there to Baghdad. Some contacts allege that both have financial resources linked to their (former/current?) ties to the former regime. Al-Ali, reportedly, was the General Manager of Media and TV in the Iraqi Ministry of Information and Culture under Saddam, and Al-Tamimi is also reported to have had close ties to senior Ba'athists.

¶16. (U) According to Embassy Cairo contacts, Arshad Tawfiq is another al-Baghdadiya manager in Cairo, and Taleb Abdoon is Cairo News Director. Before liberation, Abdoon was the head of the Baghdad satellite channel; he left for Cairo as the regime was crumbling. Tawfiq is a writer, a former Ba'ath Party official, and was Iraq's ambassador to Spain. Post-liberation, Tawfiq has called in pan-Arab media for national reconciliation and for "former Ba'athists, especially those who opposed former President Saddam Hussein, to review the party's ideology and organization and join the political process."

¶17. (SBU) Three fairly reliable contacts in Baghdad insist that the new channel does get some funding from Ragad Saddam Hussein (Saddam's daughter, who now lives in Amman) and from Aoun Hussein (involved with Uday Saddam Hussein's cigarette smuggling business during the embargo). Other contacts in Egypt have said the station's real owner is Aoun Khashlouk (who could also be Aoun Hussein), a wealthy entrepreneur in Greece who reportedly exports cigarettes to the Middle East. Iraqis in both Egypt and Iraq have confirmed to us that many of al-Baghdadiya's announcers -- including Shamoon Mati and Khadanfar Abd Al-Majeed --formerly worked at Al-Shabab TV, owned by Uday.

18. (SBU) Whatever the true ownership, the new channel is clearly connected to the Iraqi daily newspaper Al-Furat, as both frequently cross-reference and recommend one another. Al-Furat is also believed to have links to former Iraqi Ba'ath Party officials. Chief Editor Shakir al-Juburi was Paris correspondent for the al-Zaman newspaper and for Free Iraq Radio before 2003. Neither Baghdad nor FBIS as yet know much about the identity of Al-Furat's owners -- beyond masthead claims that it is published by "Al-Furat Company for Advertising, Publishing, Distribution, and Printing."

Anti-Saddam, Anti-Coalition, Pro-Ba'ath Message?

19. (U) Al-Baghda^diya Director Tawfiq claimed at an inaugural event in Cairo last month that "the channel is financed purely by Iraqis," saying it "supports freedom" but opposes "dictatorship and occupation." The day it first aired, the station showed footage of wounded Iraqis in hospitals, Saddam's statue toppling, and US soldiers, tanks, and warplanes, noting: "We should stop the bloodshed. The age of dictators is over; it's time to move beyond occupation." The channel routinely refers to coalition forces in Iraq as occupiers and to victims of the coalition as "martyrs." Iraqi militants are generally referred to as "armed men," not "terrorists" or insurgents. The channel takes a hardline view of Israel, but does not devote much airtime to Arab-Israeli issues. On October 12, it aired a program called "Egyptian Spy: Agent 1001 Trains before His Mission to Israel."

10. (SBU) Al-Baghda^diya's message parallels old Ba'athist precepts, advocating Iraqi national unity and drawing speakers from all sects, ethnic groups, and religions. It is also largely secular. While airing Koran readings and sermon excerpts, it does not broadcast entire sermons, as some Iraqi channels do. Sermon excerpts -- both Sunni and Shia -- highlight themes of national unity; many call on Iraqis to unite against the occupation. The station gave coverage to Iraqi Islamic Party speakers airing concerns in the run-up to the constitutional referendum.

Neutral Coverage of Saddam Trial

11. (U) Al-Baghda^diya ran less live footage of Saddam's trial on October 19 than did other Iraqi stations, but carried the trial as the lead item in newscasts: "Two years after his arrest, Saddam Hussein and seven others ... appeared before a special tribunal ... accused of crimes against humanity for killing over 140 men from the city of Al-Dujayl ... after a botched attempt to assassinate Saddam Hussein." The station also aired varied reactions of Iraqi viewers: "the trial should not be politicized;" "Saddam should not be tried while Iraq is still occupied;" "Saddam is still Iraq's President;" "the trial is the best thing that happened since the Americans came;" and "the death penalty is lenient compared to Saddam's tyranny."

Comment

12. (SBU) Embassies contributing to this report will continue to monitor al-Baghda^diya. It clearly has an anti-coalition, anti-Israel bias, but does not cross the line to incitement of violence. Its news coverage is mostly factual. Its secular programming and themes of national unity are wholly in keeping with Ba'athist norms, and there is an apparent effort to distance the station from the person of Saddam. If Tawfiq's comments are an accurate guide, al-Baghda^diya is trying to revive old-school Ba'athist ideology to rally Iraq's secular Sunni community, while also tapping into strong anti-coalition sentiment among the Sunni populace.

13. (SBU) Rumors of Ragad's backing for the station may be just so much conspiracy theory from Baghdad's Shia/Kurd-dominant salons; facts likely will only emerge with time. It seems unlikely however, that she would defend her father in a post-trial interview on al-Jazeera while giving money to a station that labels him a dictator.

14. (SBU) It is also difficult to evaluate the objectives of the many exiled Ba'athists who have been reported to be linked to the new station, because their ideologies may be as disparate as their geographic distribution, and because Iraqis are so polarized on the issue of de-Ba'athification. One liberal intellectual told us that all Ba'athists have jettisoned Saddam publicly by now, and that al-Baghda^diya's overall theme masks a pan-Arab agenda out of sync with a "positive democratic future for Iraq." Shia and Kurdish contacts, and a few other non-sectarian ones, say that they largely ignore the channel or scorn it as "Ba'athist," while Sunni opinion is extremely difficult to gauge. As with so many things Iraqi: what you believe depends on who you are and where you come from. Al-Baghda^diya is just the latest,

but perhaps most interesting, manifestation of Iraq's wide open media scene.

Satterfield